

Britomart Man

The architect civilising downtown Auckland.

Pip Cheshire, master architect of the \$350 million do-up of the Britomart Precinct downtown, thinks poorly of laissez-faire economics. Under the deregulatory-bent Labour governments of the 1980s, he says, city councils dismantled their architectural divisions and abandoned robust urban design for statutory

planning and the philosophical notion that an unfettered marketplace would deliver the best possible world to the body politic.

“Well, cities are too complicated for that,” says Cheshire, who studied political science at Canterbury University before architecture at the University of Auckland. “They are not only an aggregation of individual activities by corporations

and land owners, no matter how benign and benevolent they are... It's the right and proper job of city councils to order, regulate and design a city so that it becomes a decent place to live in.”

Things are looking up then at the Britomart Precinct, the 5.2ha patch book-ended by Queen Elizabeth Square on the west and Britomart Place on the east, with 17 – miraculously still standing given the plundering of the city in the 1980s – Victorian and Edwardian buildings in between. The comprehensive redevelopment, much of which will be completed in five years, is the largest heritage restoration project undertaken in the country.

In 1994, under mayor Les Mills, the Auckland City Council unveiled plans for an immediately contentious high-rise redevelopment of the area that had once been the trading heart of the city. They were scuppered in 1998 when Christine Fletcher defeated Mills at the council elections.

In 1999, after public consultation and a competition, architect Mario Madayag and JASMAX architects (of which Cheshire was a director) came up with a winning plan for the precinct. They then designed the \$211 million Britomart transport centre, opened in 2003 to a mixed response – acclaim for the building; griping at the paucity of trains.

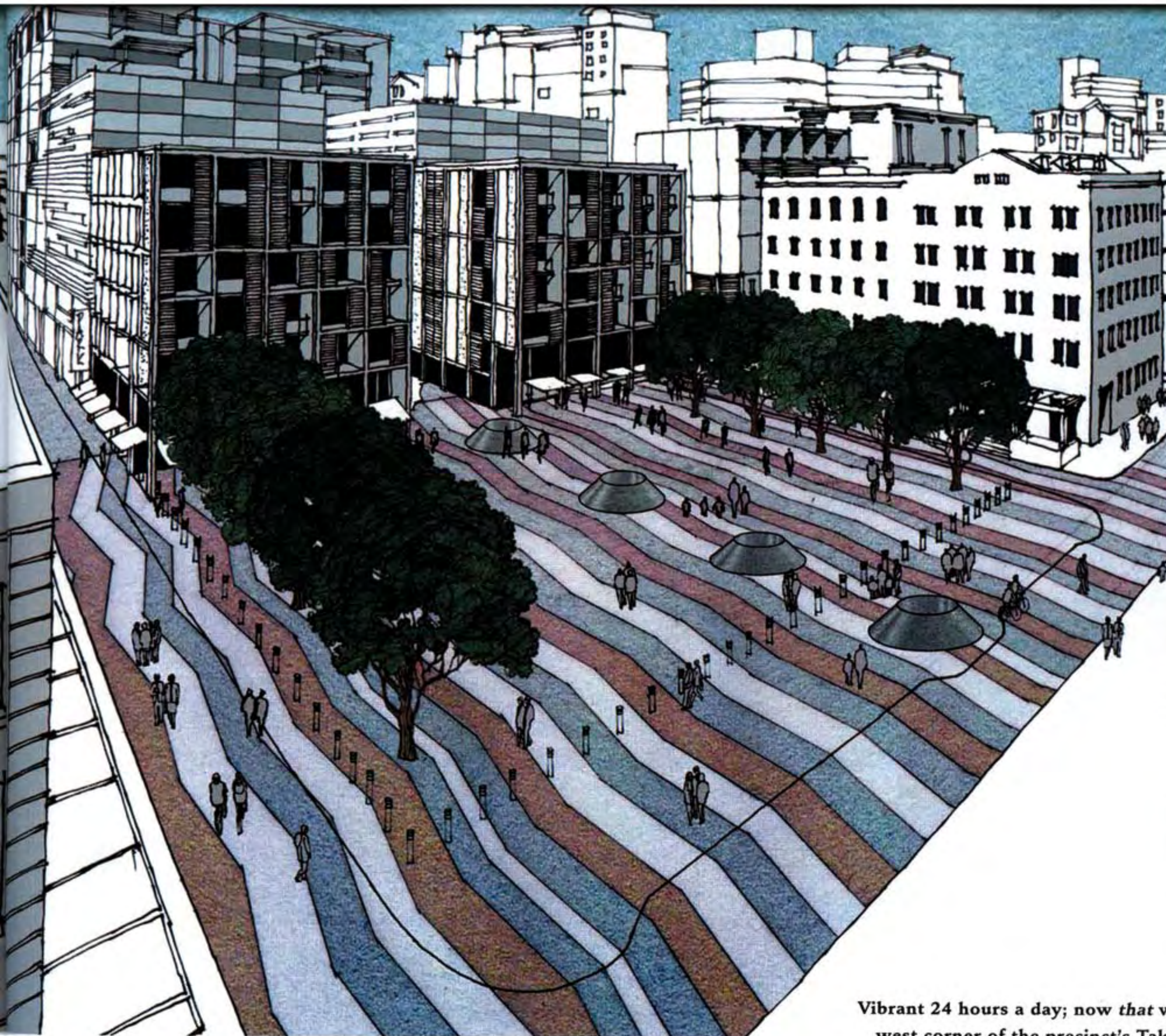
Last year, after calling for proposals from developers for the area, the city council signed off on a deal with the Britomart Group (comprised of Bluewater and its American-based New Zealand developer Peter Cooper, local heritage specialists Phillimore Properties and the Australasian property firm Multiplex). The consortium had seen off its other serious rival developer, Nigel McKenna, who by then was working with Madayag. Under the deal, the Britomart Group now owns some of the buildings and leases others, for which it paid \$32 million. Auckland City may buy back most of the heritage buildings for \$1 after 150 years.

The Britomart Group is proceeding to transform the precinct into a lowish-rise urban village of apartments and hotels, offices, shops and restaurants. Six new buildings are planned, as is a 675-space car parking building, built by the Britomart Group but owned by Auckland City. Of the historic buildings on Customs Street, two (the Barrington and Sofrana House) are destined for boutique hotel fit-outs; another two (Australis House and the Nathan Building) for apartment living.

The precinct should encourage Auckland pedestrians to feel less like second-class citizens – there'll be sheltered walkways, a public square, a lane, as well as the “Te Ara Tahuu Walking Street”, designed in the spirit of the grand straight boulevard, about which Cheshire himself is equivocal: the autocratic Napoleonic model of urban design can be a little constricting, he says.

As the landowner, the council has considerable sway, Cheshire says. A good thing. The Britomart Group had to fulfil urban design and economic imperatives as well as meet both demanding





Vibrant 24 hours a day; now that would be a nice change. Artist's impressions of, left, the north-west corner of the precinct's Takutai Square. Above: Takutai Lane, running off Customs Street.

and nebulous criteria: it had to preserve the 17 historic buildings; new buildings in the middle of the precinct could be no higher than nine storeys and those on the eastern edges no higher than 12 storeys; it had "to reinforce and reinvigorate retailing in the down town area" and ensure "the precinct is vibrant 24 hours a day".

AS THE ARCHITECTURAL overseer of the Britomart revamp, Cheshire has upscaled considerably but not all that surprisingly. Here he is, bushy-tailed and collegial when interviewed by *Metro* in 1990 for our "Things I'd Rather Not Do Without" column. On the subject of architecture: "I came north from Christchurch to a new life not knowing what to expect. Fourteen years down the track and I still can't believe my luck — reading, drawing, writing, arguing, calculating and the smell of sawdust, all shared with a great crew of committed professionals. It's [architecture], a discipline that sits midway between fine arts and engineering, metaphysics and poetry..."

On the subject of the Piha bar, Cheshire went slightly purple: "A siren whose tide song lures me to a potent mix of fear, flash, power waves and duelling egos — all carried out in one of the most

beautiful sports arenas around".

The surfer dude started his architectural career in 1980 working out of a tin shed on Jervois Road with architects Pete Bossley, Amanda Reynolds and Mal Bartleet. Cheshire and Bossley went on to establish the practice Bossley, Cheshire Architects. In 1987, JASMaD approached them and, with Harris Architects, JASMAX was formed. Shortly afterwards, the firm won the competition to design Te Papa. Last year, amid negotiations with the council and Bluewater in his role as master architect of the Britomart Precinct, Cheshire set up his eponymous practice.

Cheshire designs award-winning houses, notably the monolithically proportioned concrete and glass Congreve House in Takapuna, in which architectural swots detect the influences of the American modernist Louis Kahn and the Swiss modernist Le Corbusier. The house overlooks the sea, as does the house he designed for Bluewater's Peter Cooper's 900-acre Bay of Islands farm.

The Britomart Precinct has considerable challenges. For instance, how to take on the malls with their heavenly floors of car parks? Auckland is at an awkward stage, says Cheshire: the city has intellectually committed to public transport but

doesn't yet control the means of transport.

For another instance, how to integrate the precinct with its neighbours? How to prevent it from fraying at the edges? To the east the precinct runs slap into the imperious high-rise Scene Apartments, much vilified for nobbling vistas, and the grim chaos that is Quay Park. To the south there is Customs Street — a moat of mechanical alligators, Cheshire says. "It's a classic urban design difficulty." The grid was laid down before urban design had traction.

And how to prevent regentrification from bleaching the city of character? That won't happen, says Cheshire: thanks to the presence of new buildings, the precinct won't degenerate into a museum piece.

You can, he notes, end up with a city that is safe but dull as dishwater — Singapore, for example, where chewing gum on the footpath is verboten, but where, he says, "they are having to liven things up by discreetly encouraging low-life back into the city". One of the nails in the coffin for midtown's once interesting Elliot Street, he says, was the 1987 bulldozing of the Royal International hotel, on the corner of Victoria Street West. "There was a real sense of activity there," says Cheshire. The hotel was a bit of a dive, but hey, it beat the carpark that's there now. •